



Wounded Spirits, Ailing Hearts 4 Cultural Factors Written Video Transcript

The educational guide that accompanies this part of the series includes a detailed example. It's the case of a Vietnam combat veteran from the Southwest. His case is a dramatic but common example of why culture is critical to understanding the onset, nature, treatment and course of PTSD. [00:00.20.00] Now, don't be surprised if at first Native veterans are puzzled by, even suspicious of, your interest. Clinicians typically don't ask questions about culture. I've found it helps to start a session like this.

Mr. (Gordia), it seems like there might be a real clash between [00:00.40.00] what you experience in PTSD and culture. Can you talk about that clash?

Sure, the Native Alaskan culture is very family orientated. It's very Pacific in terms of family. [00:01.00.00] And PTSD is something I'm aware of now but I really don't understand it. But what PTSD does in that setting is that it's like oil and water. You can mix it up and have little tiny pieces and everything [00:01.20.00] and then it kind of separates again. There's no continuity to it. And the reason there's no continuity I feel is because there's no, there's no cultural understanding between the two entities. And the harder we work to bring those two understandings closer together [00:01.40.00] I think the better that it would be for everyone that has that condition and also is a traditional type person that lives in a heritage whether it be my culture or any other.

By characterizing myself as a student the patient becomes the teacher. This changes the therapeutic dynamic [00:02.00.00] and shifts the power. Because the veteran has a sense of increased control he becomes more comfortable and open to sharing information he or she believes is relevant. This simple technique is especially appropriate when you probe for cultural knowledge. Look at what happened in this particular instance.

Would you take a [00:02.20.00] moment? You began to sing a song when you were talking to Dr. Montgomery.

Yeah.

Would you sing a song that means something very special to you?

There's a lot of songs.

You pick one. I'd love to hear you sing a song and then to talk about it.



[00:02.40.00] The new (crystal) moon they say the new start of the moon, when the moon comes up to make a new, new month successful and all that you sing a certain song.
[00:03.00.00] And I had to (get myself).

[singing] [00:03.20.00] [00:03.40.00]

It's the new (crisp) of the moon and make you successful the whole month. And this when the moon comes up again you sing that song and it will make your whole (by the) month type, you know, like [00:04.00.00] your liberty for that whole month will be at ease, you know. It will be—I mean it will just come into you just naturally.

Uh-huh. And how were you feeling when you sang that song?

I feel pretty good.

As noted earlier, combat related trauma and PTSD are linked [00:04.20.00] to other psychiatric disorders, especially alcohol abuse and dependence. The question is, why is there such marked involvement with alcohol among these Native American veterans? First, heavy drinking is part of the military culture. It's closely tied to definitions of manliness and status. [00:04.40.00] When these veterans return from the service as young men they were socialized into a drinking lifestyle. Second, alcohol is the drug of choice in Native communities. It has a long deeply entrenched history of use that is bound up with matters of sociability.

(Spiro), this is true among the Indian veterans whom I've cared for. [00:05.00.00] In addition, their symptoms of PTSD are disturbing and they are difficult. Indian veterans report they drank to block pain and dull unwanted memories. Veterans tell me it's a form of self medication. Of course we know alcohol has the opposite effect. What's worse, alcohol triggers and it intensifies [00:05.20.00] the rage associated with PTSD and inhibitions reduced by alcohol, mixed with rage, leads to job loss, spousal abuse and violence. This undermines the individual's sense of coherence and already low self worth. The Native American veteran [00:05.40.00] becomes more isolated. He distances himself from the family support that is one of the great resources of his culture and one of the few anchors available in this storm of emotions. One Native told me the cure was worse than the disease. Alcohol abuse and dependence masks [00:06.00.00] the underlying symptoms of PTSD. Unattended, these symptoms get worse.

Tragically, they often lead to depression and suicide becomes more likely.

Oh yeah, in my lifetime I attempted suicide several times too. Couldn't live with myself and alcohol [00:06.20.00] was probably the only band aid, numbing agent, anything that could numb my mind, you know.

It got so bad, you know, I just wanted to—that's where all these suicidal thoughts started



coming into my mind and I just can't take this shit no more and [00:06.40.00] I want to end it now, you know.

I have an uncle who committed suicide. And he's a Vietnam veteran. And it was so hard to know what help there was out there that could have like helped him and his family. And it was just so sad to [00:07.00.00] actually have my brother and sister experience that when their father left.

In the American Indian Vietnam Veterans Project nearly 9% of the veterans reported that they currently suffer from major depression, 12% had at some time in their lives. Many acknowledged having attempted suicide. [00:07.20.00] Others had taken their lives before our project began.

[end of audio]

